

# Stop paying twice for education material

**RORY McGREAL**

Online resources, open content make proprietary textbooks obsolete

Here's an idea for eliminating government waste and helping the environment at the same time. Let's stop paying over and over again for paper-based educational material, like textbooks.

In the olden days, when one student was using a text, other students could not use it, so we had to buy many copies or have the students take turns. This was, and continues to be, extremely expensive. It was once necessary, but it no longer makes any sense at all.

With the World Wide Web, a million students can all use the same resource at the same time. Right now, thousands of readers are accessing the same article at the same time in an online newspaper or in an e-magazine or on a website. Our students can do the same.

Electronic resources are infinitely reproducible at virtually no cost. So why pay for anything more than once? Why do our cash-strapped school boards and provincial government continue to pay repeatedly for the same resources, either for the physical copies or through licensing? This becomes a recurring cost, a cost we can no longer afford to pay. It is, indeed, a vast waste of taxpayer's money. One copy is enough.

The same is true for research. Right now, researchers give away their copyright when they send their articles to publishers, who then charge university libraries and other researchers a fee if they want to read it.

In effect, taxpayers pay for the research, pay again for the salary of the researcher and then pay again to



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use the research. Individual libraries then must each pay separately to access the research, and taxpayers with no university library card must pay again if they want to access it. We're paying multiple times for the same thing. Taxpayers have already paid for the research, so why should they

have to pay again? The results of all publicly funded research should be made available to taxpayers free of charge.

The reality now is that the economics of book and other content distribution has changed. There are no longer costs for copying, storing

and distributing. The vendors know this and are raking in the greenbacks. Why don't the department of education and the school boards do their homework, look at the cost efficiencies and save themselves, and us, a bundle?

The answer is simple; rather than

buying and/or renting content, we can either produce our own or buy the full copyright to materials *once*. Or, even better, make effective use of public domain or free copyright materials. Today there are tens of thousands of high quality courses or course modules freely available produced by learning institutions across Canada, in the U.S. and around the world. Websites like WikiEducator, Connexions, Merlot and Curriki have growing collections of free educational content.

An added benefit to using open content is the ability to change it in timely fashion in response to new knowledge, new immersive technologies or new teaching approaches. If someone else owns it, we have to wait for them to make needed revisions. The world is changing rapidly; we cannot keep up using nineteenth century content models.

Across Canada, and internationally, public institutions can work together to share high quality multimedia educational content. After all, is there really a difference between B.C. physics and Alberta physics? Between Ontario Catholic school chemistry and Alberta public school chemistry? Don't the same laws apply throughout the universe?

Our education department and school boards should pay attention to open access. If taxpayers are paying for curriculum development, then the curriculum materials should be made freely available to all. They belong to us. Why should we keep paying and paying and paying? Let's wake up and smell the coffee!

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